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ABSTRACT

Fritz Lang's "Metropolis" (1927) is a seminal film because of its concern, now generic, with the profound impact technological progress has on mankind's social and spiritual progress. As in many later science fiction films, the ascendancy of artifact over nature is depicted not as liberating human beings, but as subjecting and corrupting them. This theme is reflected in the film's treatment of three focal characters--Rotwang, Maria, and the robotrix--as well as in lighting codes that formally produce meaning within the filmic text. Aspects of the lighting involve value (lightness vs. darkness) and apparent on-screen source (artificial, e.g., electric light vs. natural, e.g., sunlight or fire). "Metropolis" advocates that mechanical marvels in themselves will not ameliorate the human condition. At the end of the film the rebirth of the whole city is heralded by a transformation of darkness to lightness. This comes about through natural light from the heavens: the dawn of the new day. The thematic antinomies of artifact/nature, identity lost/identity gained, evil/good, are resolved via the codes of lighting: dark/light,and ostensibly artificial/ostensibly natural. (NKA)

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"*Metropolis*, The Lights Fantastic: Semiotic Analysis of Lighting Codes in Relation to Character and Theme"

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Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* (1927) is a seminal film because of its concern, now generic, with the profound impact technological progress has on man's social and spiritual progress. As is so often portrayed in later science fiction films, the ascendancy of artifact over nature is depicted not as liberating man, but subjugating and corrupting him. This theme is reflected in *Metropolis*' treatment of three focal characters--Rotwang, Maria and the robotrix--as well as in lighting codes that formally produce meaning within the filmic text. Aspects of lighting considered here involve value (lightness vs. darkness) and apparent on-screen source (artificial, e.g., electric light vs. natural, e.g., sunlight or fire).

The robotrix is first seen as a streamlined erector-set woman whose breasts are shiny metal and whose hips undulate with unnatural regularity as it walks, on command, in measured steps. Its face is a sleek metal mask incapable of expression. This is clearly a machine. Later the robotrix is endowed with synthetic flesh and hair, and assumes the physical appearance and other attributes of Maria. The real Maria has been preaching to the oppressed workers that between them ("the hands") and the despotic Master of Metropolis ("the brain") will come "the heart" to mediate. The false Maria has hands which she waves through the air and clenches into fists to incite

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the workers to self-destructive rebellion. The false Maria has a brain: apparently she can devise and execute evil plans, knowingly winking in a closeup shot at John Fredersen, the Master of Metropolis, as she colludes with him to destroy the workers. But the false Maria has no heart. She never clutches her heart, a gesture excessively enacted by the real Maria. And the robotrix is never framed in the same shot as Fredersen's son Freder, who is the mediating "heart."

The contrast between the real and false Maria is developed by the use of light. The real Maria is repeatedly seen in halos of light, at first in an iris shot illuminated by the sunlight in Freder's pleasure garden, and then at her subterranean altar illuminated by tapers. Both sunlight and candlelight may be considered natural light (to be sure, candles are man-made, but are of plant or animal origin occurring freely in nature.) The false Maria is created in a laboratory amidst assorted arcane, art-deco apparatus. Not only is the setting clearly man-made but so is the source of light that illuminates her: electricity.

The real Maria has more than a heart, the poetic seat of human emotion; she has a soul. The halos that surround her as well as the crosses behind her altar are images of Christianity. She preaches tolerance and mercy, and gazes up to heaven, patiently awaiting the promised messiah. She designates the cathedral for her rendezvous with Freder, who says, "To doubt you is to doubt God." Maria is, after all, spiritually the saintly mother of all the workers. The false Maria is a creation not of God, but of man, specifically a flawed man. Behind the robotrix is not the cross but an inverted pentagram, an archetypal emblem of black magic, often associated with the Goat of Mendes, symbol for the devil. The robotrix assumes the appearance of Maria by some electrical draining process suggested by intercutting between the captive real

Maria, the lab apparatus, and the slowly forming false Maria. With her appearance, the robotrix assumes Maria's identity in order to subvert the masses. The machine is therefore represented as an agent that corrupts and that robs the image of man, and thereby the image of God, of identity.

The machine gradually assumes Maria's form when rings of laboratory-generated electric light pass up and down her body. Her circulatory system is a pattern of light which rhythmically glows like a pulsing heart. The false Maria becomes a synecdoche for all of Metropolis and is the film's statement about technological progress and the human condition: like the robotrix, the life of the machine city pulses with dazzling lights, but it has neither heart nor soul.

Maria is the diametric opposite of Rotwang. She is young and female; he is old and male. She tries to liberate the workers; he tries to subjugate them. Freder seeks her in order to gain knowledge about the workers for the purpose of helping them; his father seeks Rotwang in order to gain knowledge about the workers for the purpose of harming them. Both Maria and Rotwang live in secret places. But Maria, the locus of a congregation of workers, represents community; Rotwang, who lives alone and is visited only by John Fredersen, represents isolation.

Maria is morally in opposition to Rotwang. Surrounded by Christian icons, she represents innocence and purity and faith in God. The juxtaposition of futuristic technical hardware in his laboratory with his medieval-looking home and robe, and the symbol of the inverted pentagram make Rotwang a curious combination of scientist and sorcerer. Within the context of the film, he represents knowledge and corruption. In lieu of a faith in God, he would try to usurp God by being the creator of life.

These spiritual values have analogous visual values. Maria wears white, Rotwang wears black. Maria is repeatedly seen irised in a circle of light surrounded by a darker area. The first image of Rotwang, emphasizing his materialism, is an establishing shot of the exterior of his house. The lighting here is the reverse of that used for Maria: dark and unlit, his house is a circle of darkness surrounded by a field of light.

Maria is shown with sources of light that are natural. She walks alone through the dark underground caverns with a candle. Later she retreats from Rotwang's menacing advances by backing out of the umbra of Rotwang's room into a shaft of sunlight streaming in through a skylight. Sunlight symbolizes safety: a moment later she abortively attempts escape through this skylight. Rotwang is associated with artificial forms of light, particularly his electric flashlight, in a terrifying abduction scene. Once he snuffs out Maria's candle, he insidiously stalks her relentlessly through the catacombs, exhausting his frenzied prey by letting her run blindly in the baleful blackness, only to tauntingly trap her time and again with the seemingly sentient beam of his flashlight.

This flashlight beam is more than an artificial, disembodied presence: it is an extension of Rotwang's hand which is itself artificial and disembodied. A prototypical Dr. Strangelove, Rotwang lost a hand during his scientific experiments and now has a gleaming black metal substitute. This attribute makes Rotwang an embodied dilemma in opposition to himself, similar to the way Maria is opposed to the robotrix Maria. Rotwang lost his hand trying to create robot workers conceived to obviate the necessity for living workers, who are to be destroyed. The loss of Rotwang's hand, his symbolic castration, represents at once an act of creation and destruction. The

opposition of mechanical to natural in Rotwang is an analog to the broader theme of *Metropolis*, which advocates that mechanical marvels in themselves will not ameliorate the human condition. The film further pits "the hands" against "the head." In the character of Rotwang, this thematic counterpoint has a visual correlation in terms of value: Rotwang's artificial hand is black, while his natural face and hair are white.

By the end of *Metropolis*, the thematic conflicts are worked out consistent with the values assigned throughout the film. Rotwang is killed when he falls from the top of a cathedral. Thus the scientist succumbs to a natural force, gravity, while this fall marks his spiritual descent from grace to hell. The false Maria is burned at the stake. The robotrix's artificial life, represented by the pulsing electric light, is terminated by the purging pyre, a source of natural light. The real Maria is now able to reappear and regain her identity. With the evil-doers destroyed, the Master of Metropolis has a change of heart and is reconciled with the workers. The rebirth of the whole city is heralded by a transformation of darkness to lightness. This comes about not through the ubiquitous electric lights, which have failed (due to sabotage), but through natural light from the heavens: the dawn of a new day.

The thematic antinomies of artifact/nature, identity lost/identity gained, evil/good, are therefore resolved via the codes of lighting: dark/light, and ostensibly artificial/ostensibly natural.